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Reagan's new CIA: secrets slip out

First in a three-part series on US secret operations

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As recent history has shown, it is no easy task for a relatively open society to carry out secret actions.

The Reagan administration came to office determined to strengthen the US Central Intelligence Agency's ability to carry out, if need be, covert actions — secret operations aimed at influencing events abroad.

But in three notable cases already, the administration's cover has been blown. Its covert actions have been exposed to the harsh glare of publicity:

- In Africa, where the United States has been trying to counter the influence of Libya.
- In Central America, where the administration is trying to exert pressure on the Sandinista regime of Nicaragua and "raise the cost" the Nicaraguans must pay to "export revolution" to other parts of the region.
- In Afghanistan, where the Carter administration was already reportedly involved in helping to coordinate assistance to the Afghan freedom fighters.

The press reporting about US involvement in Afghanistan — though not extensive — seems to have caused the administration the least trouble, probably because so many people seem to think that the assistance is justified. It is also clear that the US is not on its own there, but is participating in what might be called a consortium of nations, including

at least three in the region itself. The late President Anwar Sadat of Egypt disclosed last year that Egypt was helping to supply weapons to the Afghan insurgents.

In the case of Nicaragua, press reports describing a CIA "secret war" have clearly embarrassed the administration. Indications from sources inside and outside the administration are that reports the US is attempting to overthrow the left-led Sandinista regime are incorrect. Instead, the US is engaged in supporting and financing a campaign of harassment and pressure on the Sandinistas in retaliation for the support Nicaragua has given to the insurgents in El Salvador. Given the history of past US interventions in the region, however, many Latin Americans are prepared to believe the worst. Among them are Honduran civilians who fear the US will strengthen right-wing military forces there and weaken civilian moderates.

The most dramatic story appeared in Newsweek magazine in early November. The magazine asserted a secret campaign to cut the Cuban-Nicaraguan arms pipeline to El Salvador had escalated far beyond Washington's original intentions. It said the US ambassador in Honduras, John D. Negroponte, under pressure from Washington to produce results, had "improvised" and gone beyond his original orders to forge an alliance with guardsmen from the Somoza regime, now exiled from Nicaragua. As a result, said Newsweek

the American-supported secret operation threatened to destabilize Honduras instead of Nicaragua; to fortify the Marxists in Nicaragua; and to "waste US prestige along the tangled banks of the Coco River between Honduras and Nicaragua."

Administration officials say the Newsweek article exaggerated the magnitude of the operations. On Nov. 1, a senior national security official told the New York Times the clandestine operations were limited to hit-and-run raids into Nicaragua by small paramilitary units based in Honduras, skirmishes along the border, and financial support for political opponents of the Sandinistas. No Americans were directly involved, but the CIA was providing money, equipment, some training of Miskito Indians.

Despite the adverse publicity, some administration officials seem to think the CIA-backed operations are having an impact. One source noted that apparently as a result of American pressure, Sandinista leaders announced that they were writing off the possibility of acquiring Soviet-built MIG fighter planes anytime soon.

Some American intelligence experts are concerned that continuing harassment of Nicaragua will merely serve to rally support behind the Sandinistas.

Next: US threats and reports of US plots may have had a boomerang effect — causing Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi to threaten the life of President Reagan.